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SUBJECT: Serbia: Prime Minister Protests Bogdanovic Removal from Kosovo

REF: PRISTINA 25

Summary

¶1. (SBU) On January 13 the Prime Minister convoked Quint Ambassadors and Charges to formally protest Kosovo Minister Bogdanovic's expulsion from Kosovo earlier that day (reftel). The government released a statement about the meeting to highlight their protest of the action. The incident received wide press coverage. End Summary.

PM Calls in the Quint

¶2. (SBU) Prime Minister Cvetkovic called in Quint Ambassadors and Charges late on January 13 to protest the removal of Kosovo Minister Goran Bogdanovic from Kosovo earlier that day (reftel). Ministry of Foreign Affairs Political Director Borko Stefanovic accompanied the PM. Cvetkovic said that Bogdanovic had been detained near Strpce by more than 40 members of the Kosovo Police special forces, in the presence of EULEX and KFOR. He was escorted to Gate 3 (Merdare), in the opposite direction of Bogdanovic's home in Kosovo. The PM protested that this action violated his civil rights as Bogdanovic was a "citizen of Kosovo", he had a residence in Kosovo and was traveling in a private car with Kosovo plates and had an UNMIK issued ID card. The PM said that Bogdanovic had not broken any law and that the Serbian government protested this action, which violated Bogdanovic's human rights. Cvetkovic asserted that Bogdanovic had given verbal notification of his intention to travel according to established procedures and had not received any reply.

¶3. (SBU) UK Ambassador Wordsworth replied that it was important to gather all of the facts about what happened. He said that the EU Personal Representative's office had been in touch with Bogdanovic to advise him that his travel had not been approved and that he should not attempt to travel to Strpce. The PM reiterated the assertion that Bogdanovic's travel was purely private and there was no reason for his detention and removal. He also returned to the points that Bogdanovic was a resident of Kosovo traveling in a private car with Kosovo plates, carrying an UNMIK ID, and had not broken any Kosovo laws.

14. (SBU) Immediately following the meeting, Cvetkovic's office posted a press release. The text of the release follows:

Cvetkovic Protests Pristina's Decision to Deny Bogdanovic Visit to Strpce. Serbian Prime Minister Mirko Cvetkovic has urgently contacted the ambassadors of Germany, Great Britain, France, Italy and the U.S. to convey the Serbian government's protest over the decision by Pristina authorities to prevent Minister for Kosovo-Metohija Goran Bogdanovic from entering the municipality of Strpce, in Kosovo-Metohija. Cvetkovic stressed that such violations of human rights and the right of freedom of movement in the southern Serbian province cannot be tolerated. He sought the support of these countries for condemning such steps by EULEX and KFOR and for efforts to create decent living conditions in Kosovo-Metohija.

Note: During the meeting Cvetkovic referred only to the presence of EULEX and KFOR when Bogdanovic was stopped by the Kosovo police. He did not request that the Quint condemn EULEX or KFOR actions. End note.

Kosovo Ministry Officials Admit the Visit Was Not Personal

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15. (SBU) On January 14, Kosovo Ministry Assistant Minister Dragan Petkovic and Bogdanovic's Chief of Staff Vlada Jovicic told us and Deputy of the EU Personal Representative's office, Ben Crampton, that the expulsion had further aggravated a delicate situation. (Both Petkovic and Jovicic were expelled with Minister Bogdanovic on January 13.) Both clearly admitted that they were there to visit parallel schools and municipal authorities in Strpce, but said that Bogdanovic had wanted to encourage all Serbs in the enclaves to work together. Petkovic said there was increasing pressure "from our communities and among the radicals" to show that Belgrade had influence. "Even though we cooperate with the international community, compared to our predecessors [Samardzic], we are being humiliated," Petkovic said. On the side, both said the humiliation was taking its toll on Bogdanovic, who was tiring of his job. "Perhaps people like [northern hardliner] Marko Jaksic are right. If they come to power, then we will see how much the international community can do in Kosovo without our help," Petkovic said. Jovicic said he thought Bogdanovic may individually call in Quint Ambassadors to express his personal frustration. We reiterated that the agreed procedures had been violated and they were told beforehand there would be consequences. We cautioned them not to be shortsighted and not to sour their working relations with either EULEX or KFOR.

President's Kosovo Advisor Concerned About Impact on Future Visits

16. (SBU) President Tadic's Kosovo Advisor, Mladjan Djordjevic, reiterated to us during a January 14 meeting the government's unhappiness with the "poor message" that was sent by the Kosovo authorities' decision to expel Bogdanovic. Djordjevic said that it was a contradiction for the international community to tell Serbia to influence the Kosovo Serbs and then to have visits denied:

"there is no influence without access." Djordjevic also expressed concern for the future, saying that he had traveled to Kosovo twice without problem under the "new procedures" of informing EU Personal Representative Peter Sorensen. He and Mayor Djilas, who are both leaders in the Nasa Srbija Foundation, are scheduled to travel to Kosovo at the end of the month or in early February with a foundation donation to Decani Monastery and to deliver a truck to a village near Prizren, and Djordjevic wondered what impact the Bogdanovic incident would have on these plans.

Press Offers Wide Coverage

17. (U) All Serbian press covered the incident, although some were more sensationalist and expressed greater outrage. Headlines ranged from "Minister Attacked!" (Kurir) to "Bogdanovic Did Not Respect the 'Procedure'" (Danas). Most media gave a very straightforward account of the event, and some even solicited and received exclusive statements from Kosovo authorities. The daily Politika presented arguments from both sides of the debate, quoting Kosovo's Ministry of Internal Affairs that Bogdanovic had three days earlier "entered Kosovo on private business, which all citizens of Kosovo have a right to do, but yesterday began some political activities," which brought an end to the legality of his visit. Much of the exchange between Bogdanovic and Kosovo police was filmed by Serbian press who were traveling with the Minister, and extended excerpts from the exchange were broadcast on evening newscasts.

Comment

18. (SBU) While the incident received top coverage on television,

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it did not make the front page of any Belgrade papers and some buried the story as far back as page ten. Kosovo issues continue to slide down the public's priorities even as President Tadic and FM Jeremic increasingly focus their rhetoric on the post-International Court of Justice opinion environment. The Serbian government's line that Bogdanovic was traveling as a private citizen was disingenuous. Ambassador Wordsworth told us that he had spoken with MFA political director Borko Stefanovic earlier in the day on January 13 and Stefanovic had admitted that Bogdanovic's visit had been a mistake. Bogdanovic has chafed under the visit procedures for months, complaining bitterly at every opportunity that his requests had been rejected or had gone unanswered. FM Jeremic will certainly highlight this incident in the upcoming January 22 UNSC session on Kosovo. End Comment.
PEDERSON